

**A Lifetime of Reading and Writing**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Robert John Miller (“Bob”)

Thesis Advisor  
Peter Davis

Ball State University  
Muncie, Indiana

April 2007

Expected Date of Graduation  
05 May 2007

## Abstract

The purpose of this project is to begin two manuscripts: one of my own work, and one of letters sent to me. The project consists of three parts. In the first part, I organize my previously written creative work, add newly written work to the collection, and submit my work to various literary journals and magazines; in the second part, I write letters to people who have influenced me and ask that they respond with a list of the works that have been most essential to them; the third part is a reading of some of the pieces from the first section.

## Acknowledgements

Peter Davis could not have been more helpful or instrumental in the completion of this project. Also, his *Poet's Bookshelf* served as inspiration for the *Letters* section of my project.

Joanne Edmonds, James Ruebel, and the staff of the Honors College have always been especially kind and friendly, and I really appreciate that.

Also, speaking generally, I'd be nowhere without the great people in the English department. And the philosophy department.

Thanks to the Virginia Ball Center for Creative Inquiry, which allowed time this last semester for me to follow my interests.

And, of course, special thanks to the people who read my letters and the friends who sincerely wrote back. Thanks also to the people who bother to read my creative work, and thanks especially to the ones who like it (and the ones who care enough to tell me when they don't).

Thanks to the journals and magazines that have reviewed my work: *Softblow*; *Broken Plate*; *Odyssey*; *Expo*; Golden Key International's Poetry Contest; *Indiana Review*; *Rattle*; *Zone 3*; *Black Warrior Review*; *McSweeney's.net*; *The Progressive*; *MiPoesias*; and *Barnwood Press*.

And, for listening to me read, thanks to the Ball State Student Philosophy Conference (3/24/2007); the Ball State Student Anthropology Conference (4/9/2007); the Philosophy Departmental Recognition Day (4/13/2007); and the English Departmental Recognition Day (4/20/2007).

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Davis", written in a cursive style.

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**Section I: Things I've written**

**published in THE BROKEN PLATE**

## The Life and Times of Patricia

By the time she hit terminal velocity she began wondering if she had made the right decision to leap out of a 22<sup>nd</sup> story window instead of taking the stairs. She was tired and the elevators had been out of service since Wednesday and, after all, if she didn't make it home soon she'd never have enough time to bake a pie before the big bake sale and ooh! she needed to pick up dry cleaning else she sport thrice-soiled underwear underneath her sundress and even if no one would find out she would still know and it would affect her whole persona all night long what with the itching and who has time to for all those stairs anyway?

So there she is, plummeting, and it's actually sort of a fun plummet except for the anxiety about impending and almost certain death but at least she had the comfort of knowing that the death would be her own so she wouldn't have to worry about mourning too much or not enough or even at all and what appropriate dress attire would be for the funeral and she sort of felt guilty about causing her family and acquaintances so much grief over little old her. She wondered how the headline would read for her obituary and speculated things like "Delicious Pie Left Unbaked As Woman Falls to Doom" or "Dry Cleaner: Woman's Underwear Far More Soiled Than Most."

When she leapt out of the window she imagined that she would hit the ground running with maybe a somersault or a cartwheel perhaps as an Olympic judge happened to be walking by and he would exclaim with great passion "HOLY LORD JESUS THAT'S THE MOST AMAZING SPECTACLE I'VE EVER SEEN" and immediately award her a gold medal or an honorary gold medal or at least help her get on all the talk shows but now she realized that with this much speed she probably couldn't stick the landing and her dreams of Olympic glory would be crushed along with most of her body.

And the moment before she introduces herself to the pavement she remembers that her last grandparent is supposed to die tomorrow or the next month and thinks for the first time I'm supposed to have quasi-mature feelings and coping mechanisms instead of little girl scared under a blanket as-long-as-I'm-under-here-everything-will-be-okay type feelings but the little girl scared under a blanket as-long-as-I'm-under-here-everything-will-be-okay type feelings are much more comforting and I know that collectively speaking mine is only one blade in life's field but I'm not going to marginalize anyone's loss including my own because that's what it means to be alive and if we can't help each other through this thing then what good are we at all and it sure feels big and important to me right now and it's okay to have feelings about things so I think I will and she weeps and curses anathema upon the elevator maintenance staff and also the architects who failed to recognize the need for escalators.

## Shoes

### I. An Object

I have a miniature pair of shoes that my fingers put on to parade around the coffee table on weekend afternoons before I make a pot of coffee to dunk cookies. They're no bigger than my ring finger passed the second knuckle and appear perhaps produced specifically for pinky toes if pinky toes were, instead, miniature feet. The shoes belong to a miniature person, no more than a foot high and probably less. In light they glimmer black, boasting cleanliness and comfort, yearning to parade around the coffee table of their own accord but, being merely the shells of feet, look to me their savoir to not let them fall into the disrepair of disuse.

They're molded rubber (or perhaps latex, or perhaps something else), a distinct line running down the center of each signifying a perfect union, each shoe married unto itself but also to its other. On the inside where the shoe size should be the sole reads "2 INDONESIA" on one and "3 INDONESIA" on the other; I wonder where "1 INDONESIA" has trounced off to and imagine a three-legged man missing a shoe, or a dystopian future in which individual shoes are stolen much more frequently and, therefore, bought in three's to compensate. The shoes are complete in molded-on detail, including stitches and laces and heels and treads on the bottoms. They are formal shoes, dress shoes, out-on-the-town shoes, but they mostly stay in and entertain.

They smell like rubber but only if they're in my nose; otherwise they are odorless.

### II. A Poem

Here is a list of things that shoes don't do:  
 Shoes don't talk behind your back.  
 Shoes don't laugh when you hurt.  
 Shoes don't fight about who left the towels in the sink.  
 Shoes don't care if you like them.  
 Shoes don't make great pets.  
 Shoes don't swim very well.

Here is a list of things that shoes care about:  
 Where you're going

Here is a list of things that shoes don't care about:  
 Where you've been

### III. A History

Footwear was not invented like the internal combustion engine; there was no meticulous planning or deliberate engineering, no overt science. All that came later.

Footwear was invented when someone decided to walk on something pointy and realized his feet had made a mistake in not being covered up. So he took a pelt and some leather bits and suddenly his feet were not only warm but less vulnerable too. Later on some people became so good at making shoes that they called themselves cobblers. This name has nothing to do with pies—those people are called bakers. Now even dolls come with footwear.

Eventually some people had things that other people wanted but weren't willing to give up and the people who were bigger got what they wanted or else.



#### IV. An Example

The *Chicago Sun-Times* reports that in March of 2005 a teenager was murdered for his \$110 basketball shoes. He was shot in the lower back and left to die, shoeless, in an alley. The paper quotes the boy's mother saying, "That's what it's all about. I bought him shoes."

Wilmot and Hocker explain that conflicts are usually about power and self-esteem, about feeling disadvantaged and unimportant. If it was about shoes, he probably would have robbed a shoe store.

I wasn't there. I don't know. But I refuse to believe anyone sees anyone as merely a walking shoe rack.

#### V. A Reality

In Alvin Toffler's 1970 nonfiction bestseller *Future Shock*, he writes about Barbie:

*"Barbie," a twelve-inch plastic teen-ager, is the best-known and best-selling doll in history. Since its introduction in 1959, the Barbie doll population of the world has grown to 12,000,000—more than the human population of Los Angeles or London or Paris. Little girls adore Barbie because she is highly realistic and eminently dress-upable. Mattel, Inc., makers of Barbie, also sells a complete wardrobe for her including clothes for ordinary daytime wear, clothes for formal party wear, clothes for swimming and skiing.*

This excerpt introduces a chapter titled "The Throw-Away Society," a telling of things-to-come including built-in obsolescence and new manufacture cheaper than repair and the general transience of the developing American culture; coincidentally the shoes are remnants of a Ken Doll, Barbie's male counterpart--his body maimed, burnt, and disposed of--used in a presentation of Dalton Trumbo's novel *Johnny Got His Gun*, a book that warns of the throw-away-ness of people and the efficiency of war to do so.

I kept Ken's shoes, though. I can use those.

### **Internet Trading Cards**

I traded my friend George for a  
Comm major

He was a liability—posted too many  
Awkward photos of me--

But this new guy has connections--  
A Real Team Player--

In the summer off-season I'll probably  
Pick up George again

But for now my network needs more  
Credibility

**published in ODYSSEY**

**An Insulting Poem**

This poem

Is

Insulting

Because

It has line breaks for no

Reason

But

To mock.

**to SOFTBLOW**

*(note: after rejection, a few of these poems were sent to RATTLE)*

**Tuesday by the pool in Cambodia**

After riding in an air-conditioned bus through the slums-that-are-not-slums of the poor-that-are-not-poor (here), past the squatters and the barbed wire fences and the topless children with protruding bellies,

I return to my three-star Western-style hotel with hot water and teeth-brushing water and drinking water and,

Of course, pool water--

A kidney-shaped basin that reminds me I am better than they are with my manmade lake, not to wash with or brush with or drink, but

To sit by.

**How about you pedal me around all morning?**

Yeah—you pedal me around in a sort of baby carriage, sort of bike-type thing—  
I'll sit in this seat up front, and you sit in the back and pedal, and I'll give you, like, two dollars or so.

I know you're 15 or 71 or something—that's okay, I'm totally fine with that. And  
I know it's 95 degrees out—that's cool, too, because I have sunscreen and every so often I'll  
have you pull over so I can buy a bottle of water for myself. Don't you worry, I'll be fine.

Now about the traffic: ignore it. No turn signals or waiting for cars to turn. If a pedestrian gets  
in the way—damn them—just yell, “beep, beep,” and smile.

Under no circumstances should you stop pedaling. I mean,

You do want a tip, right?

**In Thailand's hills**

Welcoming an ice breeze through the holes in the walls of a raised thatched hut with a  
corrugated tin roof, resting from the terrible sun,

an ant crawls up my arm.



**At the Saigon Airport around 5 pm on December 29, 2006**

Remember that time when we were shy and watched Shakespeare theatre productions on film and you gave me a box of raisins and some animal crackers while we sat two seats apart and thought about each other?

Me too.

**To the girl selling flowers in the street around 11 pm in Saigon**

To you, three-feet tall, sundress'd, ribs protruding, hands on my belly, stance like a SWAT team, demanding that

I, 5'10", t-shirt and jeans'd, ribs healthfully hidden, my stride inadvertently kicking your fragile body into traffic, heading to dinner in an unfamiliar city, might

Give a dollar for a flower that I don't want and probably isn't yours to sell,

That you might eat dinner, too, or perhaps a snack to fill the belly-you-do-not-have, and I,

Instead, making a ridiculous scene, running blocks toward my hotel, frightened by an assertive, flower peddling, six-year-old street girl—

To you I assure that under different circumstances—it's the circumstances that you must understand—under different circumstances, I would feed you. Or,

At least, I hope.

**to GOLDEN KEY INTERNATIONAL'S POETRY CONTEST**

**proximity is a cruel mistress**

Everyone knows there are starving children somewhere and people love Angelina Jolie because she feeds a couple of them. So does my Mom, but people don't like her as much because they've met my mom and they haven't met Angelina Jolie. Plus my Mom isn't as thin as Angelina Jolie.

Everyone also knows about globalization and has strong opinions about it—  
Opinions like, "it's good," or, "it's bad."

If my neighbors were starving I'd help if I could. But I live in places where there isn't much starvation and the hunger is all the way across town, so I just donate at Christmas or Thanksgiving or whenever.

But the question is what with the internet and all who am I supposed to count as my neighbor when I can talk with the girl in Romania easier than I can talk with the kid across the street?

**to 32KLX**

**Wednesday April 4 2007**

I used to tell people that I have a dream that  
We'll realize the ideals we started with that  
We'll realize that people are equal at birth that  
We'll try to care and understand each other before we judge one another even the vicious racists

I used to tell people that I have a dream that  
We'll transform jangling discords into symphonies of brotherhood that  
We'll work together pray together struggle together go to jail together that  
We'll stand up for freedom together knowing that we'll be free

I used to tell people things and  
People used to listen

**Thursday April 12 2007**

Kalli texts me  
Vonnegut is dead

I text Kalli  
That's why I'm drinking

Kalli texts me  
Oh good

**Monday April 16 2007**

I did not go to  
Class today because  
I was too busy



**to EXPO**

**Lately most of my conversations revolve around May**

I call my mom  
She says it's okay  
I say okay  
That's all

I meet a professor  
He says it'll be okay  
I say okay  
That's all

I sit with a bartender  
He says it'll be okay  
I say okay  
One more but then  
That's all

## **Since You Really Want To Know I Will Tell You The Truth**

When I graduate from college, having spent the last four years reading, working, drinking, discussing, listening, sitting in lecture halls, writing notes and poems and stories, illegally downloading music and films and pornography, wearing secondhand clothes, wondering who my parents were and if I will disappoint them—

When I graduate from college, socially expected to assume responsibility for the injustices of previous generations, to understand the nature of the world and of life—

When I graduate from college, disappointed that my education has only begun, that I have enslaved myself to increasingly complex feelings of guilt, that changing the world one letter at a time is a slow, arduous, daunting, disheartening process—

When I graduate from college, amused by the similarity of the words postmodern postmortem and postpartum—

When I graduate from college, still young, still human, still confused—

I am buying a wallet-sized version of my diploma,

I am moving to someplace warm and letting my hair grow and sleeping outside,

I am making love in the afternoons and taking naps and jogging, charming middle-aged career women to buy me dinners and fuck me,

I am refusing to let debt force me into a career that I despise and will adjust my standard of living accordingly;

To be honest, I am wasting myself; I am graduating to drop out; I am, having achieved your standards, living by my own;

I hope all of this does not sound ungrateful.

**On Leaving**

We hug and kiss and say we love each other  
Because you're leaving for two years

But it's probably the best thing for our relationship  
Because I tend to lose people who float around here

**I went to college and did pretty good**

If you want to get an A you have to show up  
You have to if you want to get an A, show up  
If you don't show up maybe you can get a B  
But you certainly won't get an A if you don't show up

If you're okay with a C you can go like once a week  
Go like once a week but that's if you're okay with a C go  
You just need to pass and that's it like for something  
You don't actually want to know about just barely show up

To get an F well it's stupid to get an F but that's why  
You're getting an F I guess right I mean maybe the  
Class is real hard but then switch sections and then  
Just show up if you show up maybe you'll get an A

## Fear and Self-Loathing in Muncie

I went to college not thinking of a career.

The chorus chimes in:

*Deal with Matters of Consequence!*

*Go to important places, and do important things!*

Instead, I thought mostly about reading books; about having The College Life; about growing as a person; about how to live, and love, and how to die.

I certainly was not thinking about a career.

The chorus chimes in again:

*Be happy! You have arrived!*

But I'm not sure that there is such a thing as arriving. Wherever you are, there you go.

I will be poor, I thought, that's fine, because I am an English major, and what we do is mostly be poor; we're comfortable that way; it costs too much to have money.

Now, for example, I write poems at 1:07 AM, and I think,

Robert, just—

Don't *stall*—

Keep *driving*—

Do *something*, for godssakes—

But, then I think,

There is nothing else to life;

This is not a postponement;

This is

*it*.

## Why People Lose Touch

If you have  $T$  amount of time,  
And you have  $F$  number of friends,  
Then how many friends can you keep?  
Call this number  $Z$ .

Now mark an  $X$  where you live.  
Now mark a  $Y$  where each friend lives.  
Now divide  $Z$  by distance  $XY$ .

Remember to take time off work--  
That means lost pay.

And remember--  
Family.

Now subtract any time you keep for yourself.  
Maybe you have a hobby?

Write your answer, here:

If you have a positive number then  
You might be lonely.

If you have a negative number then  
You might be lonely.

If you're exactly at 0 then  
You might read too many books on time management.

**to MCSWEENEYS.NET**



## **An Open Letter to Xerox Office Printing Business**

Dear Xerox Office Printing Business,

I recently purchased a few reams of your multi-use, multi-purpose papers—they are truly, as you say, the "workhorses of papers." I have used your multi-purpose paper for years—YEARS—not only because they are less expensive than specialty papers and perform adequately on all types of equipment, but because they also fold easily for use in origami projects and/or smallish paper hats.

And as long as we're being candid, sometimes after purchasing a few reams on a weekend afternoon I rush home from the store, rip open the packages (which spews paper throughout the living room), strip naked, and roll around for hours. Please don't judge me like the neighbors do.

But my true reason for writing: this last weekend I rushed home from the store for the usual reasons (see above), but was suddenly attacked! Are you aware that your paper products have thin edges that cut like razorblades? I understand if you are not aware, because I was not aware until just this last weekend. I had unknowingly created a labyrinth of paper knives! I tried to roll around them to safety, but the paper gave no mercy to my naked body. Your papers can be dangerous weapons!

Is this a new paper design, or have I been lucky until now? Have you considered making edgeless paper products, or perhaps adding a rubber liner to the outer edge of each sheet? I do not want to estimate how much damage your products have done, but I do not think I am alone.

Please help me understand what's going on.

Yours sincerely,  
Bob Miller

to **THE PROGRESSIVE**

**Dear President Bush**

I write, penis in hand,  
Yellowing my front lawn's snow

Dear President Bush  
I weep for you

(I drink and wait  
To refill my ink)

I weep for you  
You sad sad man  
Selling the blood on your  
White white shirts

(Drunk, I collapse)

In the morning the neighbors ask who is he with his dick out  
Writing to the president does he know he can never mail that  
It would melt before it got halfway to the White House and  
Then, well, that letter could never fit through the door anyway

**to ZONE 3**

## on epistemology

I know some things and other things I don't know and  
 Some things I think I know but don't and other things I know but  
 Think I don't and it's all generally speaking rather confusing a lot of the time.

Like suppose I know something for the wrong reasons or I don't  
 Know something for the wrong reasons or I put a dollar  
 Under a hat and someone else takes the dollar when I'm not looking and someone else adds a  
 dollar when I'm not looking then do I know there's a dollar under the hat and how many times  
 can I look away and know there's a dollar under the hat without people thinking I'm crazy? I  
 mean I can't watch my money all the time—that's what hats are for.

**on metaphysics**

There's a this and there's a that and sometimes they're friends and sometimes they're not and what this is I don't know and what that is I'm not sure of either.

Sometimes people think there's only a this or there's only a that and that's all there is according to them so this question of how there's a this and a that doesn't come up anymore but a lot of other people think it doesn't work that way.

And then of course there's people who says there's a this and there's a that and there's some other stuff like strings or blobs or something but who the hell knows.

**on ethics**

I'm pretty sure there's right and I'm pretty sure there's wrong and I'm pretty sure I do both of them a lot of the time but I'm not sure I know that and I'm not sure I know that I don't know that either.

Is it still attempted murder if the guy I'm trying to kill is already dead when I shoot him?  
There's a whole Matlock episode on that.

A professor asked me once, he asked me, if I'm supposed to do what I think is right but what I think is right is actually wrong then am I supposed to do things that are wrong? and I said I hope so because that would really get me off the hook for a lot of the stuff I've done.

**to BLACK WARRIOR REVIEW**



**sometimes i pretend to be a bear**

in bed where it's safe and not in alaska  
like grizzly man though i envy him

but sometimes i pretend to be a human  
and my bear friend asks  
what makes you so human and how about you be a bear some more?

i say i can't be a bear anymore i am a human!

and my bear friend says no-you-are-a-bear!

i pause, and say, i am sorry, i want to stop arguing, i am in love with your voice. my bear friend  
says, me too.

we make love into the afternoon.

**a note to my husband, the day after christmas**

Cereal, after sex, is fine.  
You can eat a bowl of cereal after we have sex,  
That's o-k-a-y with me.  
I understand that you see it as a compliment.

But  
When you invited the neighbors over to be the  
Bowls  
To our  
Spoons,  
I do not believe you were talking about cereal still.

You were talking about having sex with the neighbors.

Also I am skeptical that Neighborhood O's  
is the name of a legitimate cereal.  
I called the supermarket, Ted. I called the supermarket.  
They've never heard of it.

**adventures in sexual anonymity**

I know we had our first few dates online so when we finally  
Met personally we could skip straight to the sex

But you're not attractive and I lied about being a man  
So let's just turn the lights off and pretend we're lesbians

Where are you going I love you and we both love Bruce Lee  
Unless that was a joke on your profile you coy rascal come back

I miss you already

**the missionary explains his sexual prowess**

“The man--the giver--lays on top and fucks the woman--the receiver--who is pinned on her back.”

“I don’t understand,” said the student. “Why can’t the woman be the fucker?”

“Because she doesn’t have a penis.”

“Oh.”

“The man fucks the woman because he has a penis.”

“Is there more to sex than fucking?”

“No.”

**to INDIANA REVIEW**

**why i will be good at uncling**

My sister is pregnant which will make me an uncle in October.

Uncle Bob.

I will be good at uncling because I love cookies and  
I have no qualms about sneaking cookies against my sister's  
Will.

Also, I am responsible enough to use the oven—  
for baking cookies.

My cookie supply will be endless.

Uncle Cookie.

**uncle responsibilities include**

Primarily,  
Birthday cards.  
I forget one birthday and oh man—  
I'm done.

So,  
I'm going to have to get a date book.

**uncling practice**

I've been practicing my uncling on a doll.

So far, there's only been two fires—

The first one wasn't my fault and can be summed up by the phrase  
"Act of God."

The second one was only half my fault because my roommate didn't know where the baking  
soda was (everyone knows we keep it next to the chocolate syrup).

The third fire was averted because, despite  
The doll's wishes, I  
acted responsibly.



**to BARNWOOD PRESS**

### **At a House Demolition Party**

They tear down houses because abandoned houses are where the  
Abandoned people live so I ask the neighbor  
I ask him what's going on here, you know, we're here to figure out  
What's going on and you know what he says?

He says he's worried that his house is going to get hit (that's  
Why he's outside) because that backhoe might forget which house is which  
House so I say

How about that Super Bowl? How about that Super Bowl? Colts and  
Bears but no Lions, you know, so I want to know about the Super Bowl in  
Michigan and he says he's a Patriots fan and then we're quiet and I say  
It's nice though, you know, two teams from the Midwest and he  
Agrees as we watch the house burial

### **So There's a Panel Discussion on the State of the Youth**

And this one guy says that  
All these snot-nosed kids with money aren't motivated  
They just don't do anything but sit around and play video games and get drunk and high and  
I don't have a high school education and look at me now so why are these kids  
With everything  
Doing nothing

And this other guy says  
Yeah well all these kids without money aren't motivated  
They just don't do anything but sit around and play video games and get drunk and high and  
Why are these kids  
With nothing  
Doing nothing

## **So There's a Panel Discussion on the State of the City**

And this one guy says  
I don't know how you stop violence but I know you  
Don't use sponges against violent crimes  
And that's really hard to argue with so  
No one did

I wish someone would have said something like  
How about we do use sponges against violent crimes, you know,  
We could make lots of sponges, thick padded weapons-proof people-sized sponges, and  
Pass them out like candy so that everyone had one good sponge and one spare sponge to have  
When the good sponge was dirty and maybe even a  
Third sponge (you know for whatever)

And schools could have sponge drills like fire drills or tornado drills and everyone  
Would wear their sponges and

When someone was violent everyone else could just hop into a sponge and  
Let him be violent until he wept

**to MIPOESIAS**

**Network Currencies; or, How To Get Ahead**

If you want power  
You can buy it

If you don't have money  
The people you know  
Are better than money

If you don't know people  
Use charm

If you're not charming  
Become an expert in  
Something--  
It doesn't matter what

If you're not an expert in  
Something--

Buy a gun

## How to Control Things

First, invent a language. Fill it with –isms if you can. If  
You don't have –isms, fill it with jargon. The key is to make sure that  
As few people as possible think they understand what you're saying.

Have you heard about the Global War on Terror? We're killing  
That terrific monolith. Or, we were. Now it's called  
*Ongoing military operations throughout the world.*  
It's still terrific.

Try having an argument without using the words  
I Hate Everything About You

Try having an argument using only the words  
I Love Your Sweater Where Is It From

Try having an argument without using the words  
Anything That Ends In -Ism

Try having an argument using only the words  
Shoe Hat Dude Mountain

Okay I'm going to go I need a  
Double Grande Peppermint Raspberry Extra Wet 180 Organic Mocha (with whip)

**Five Hours to Los Angeles**

Somebody shut that baby up okay? Jesus  
Shut that kid up. If I was that kid's parents  
I'd shut that kid up. One good slap and that  
Little baby'd shut up, you know? That's what  
My parents did to me boy you know I  
Learned how to shut up fast. Jesus  
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